

Interview with Elizabeth (Betty) Haselton

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Foreign Service Spouse Series

ELIZABETH (BETTY) HASELTON

Interviewed by: Patricia Norland

Initial interview date: April 20, 1993

Q: This is Patricia Norland interviewing Betty Haselton on April 20, 1993.

HASELTON: I was born in San Francisco, which means with one foot in the ocean. My father was, I think, from the South. He was in the cavalry when he was young, and of course in earlier times horses were extremely important since there weren't cars, airplanes, et cetera. People who fought either marched around carrying rifles over their shoulders or if they were lucky got a horse to ride instead.

Q: You were orphaned very early, I believe.

HASELTON: My mother died when I was eight, I think it was. My father died when I was 16. But I was always living with someone, relatives or friends, for two years, then someone else for two years. People were kinder then, I think, and when they found someone who did not have an established home and who had no mother, they reached out and gave you some time.

Q: When you finished your education, you saved your pennies and took a trip.

HASELTON: Well, I never finished my education, though I got my BA in history at the University of California at Berkeley (1925.) I don't consider that I'm "educated" now, but

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yes: at that time there were large passenger ships which carried freight, different from true freighters. They had regular ports of call completely around the world and were based more or less in San Francisco.

People were taking such trips then. Planes were scarce. They weren't so accommodating, and there was more pleasure in being on a pleasant ship. First you stopped in Honolulu, then Shanghai, then down to India, and so forth, working your way to Europe. On the ship one evening I heard two or three men harmonizing. Being musical, I thought, well, I can't sing, but I'll listen closely. I charged out and burst into these three men, who were Norrie, Tom Wailes (who also became an FSO) and another fellow. They were all from Princeton, traveling together, which was common then because you could have a whirl aboard ship on these long voyages. So that's where I met my future husband.

Q: I believe your husband joined the Foreign Service in 1935. One of your early posts after Manchester was Calcutta. Can you tell us some of your experiences there?

HASELTON: Well, I can't tell you much, I was in such a blur. Calcutta is not a summer resort, and it was jammed with people because of its importance. People came and went. It was worse than a train station.

Q: What was the condition of the streets, for instance?

HASELTON: Terrible. The only time when they had any semblance of cleanliness was during the rainy season. The British had improved downtown somewhat. There were gutters and drains to carry off the water.

Q: Were there brahmin cows wandering around?

HASELTON: All cows were sacred. This belief requires a lot of imagination for Westerners, but that's what you have to do when you're in another's country.

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Q: I understand that to avoid the heat you sometimes went to the mountains, to Darjeeling.

HASELTON: Darjeeling is in the far north, close to China, and the altitude there runs from five or six thousand feet to perhaps ten thousand feet. I think at that time you had to get there by train. It was the custom to rent a small car, a baby Pullman, for oneself and one's family. The car was equipped with bedrooms, dining room, sitting room, and bathroom.

During the night our son, who was very young, developed a massive swelling in his eye. He looked terrible when we saw him the next morning. We were terrified. We could do nothing on the train, except to put cold compresses on that side of his head to try to bring down the swelling.

When we arrived at the station in Darjeeling, we asked for a good doctor. I don't know what his nationality was, but he gave a diagnosis of trachoma, a practically incurable condition; a dreadful diagnosis. So we turned around immediately and went back to Calcutta to consult our British doctor, and he said, "No, a spider bit him. Keep him cool and damp with these pads. He'll get well." Fortunately, it healed with time. There was no long term injury.

Q: Meanwhile, things were very difficult in Calcutta, I believe.

HASELTON: Yes, it was terribly hot. From two to five in the afternoon there wasn't a soul on the streets. It did have one decent season. We had a rather large consulate and that's why Norrie was sent there.

Q: What was the situation with cholera there?

HASELTON: There's always cholera in India, but there's a cholera season. They try to keep it quiet, but everybody knows — at least that long ago we knew, and everyone left town that could. But if you worked for an American mission, you had to stick with your job.

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So we couldn't leave, except that when it got so bad one could hardly breathe, the boy and I went to a cooler place for a while.

Q: I believe your son contracted cholera. Tell me about that experience.

HASELTON: It's a contagious thing, comes from filth and dirt. My son was five or six then. I handled him for the most part because I didn't want foreign people to touch him. So how he got the disease, I don't know. It's possible he caught it from a drink of tomato juice while on a ride with the driver. Everything outside your own house, of course, was dirty, but you can't keep young children locked up indoors if that city is where you're assigned.

The child was very ill. I finally got him on a ship. We had trouble getting a doctor — the doctors were exhausted. This was the cholera season, during the hot season. There was a meeting of some Scottish doctors taking place at the time and my husband begged one of them to come see the child. Finally, the head of the commission came, a very forthright man, and he told us to get the boy out of India or he could not vouch for his life.

So Norrie pulled every string he could. there were no planes, so we had to take a train to Bombay, which has a good port where foreign ships put in. Our son was so weak! Norrie carried him in his arms. We finally got passage on a ship to Capetown. I kept quiet that the boy had been diagnosed as having had cholera. If they'd known, they might have thrown him off the ship in port at Capetown. I left the ship, consigning the boy to a foreign woman in whom I had confidence. She said she'd keep her eye on him until he got to New York, where he was met by some relatives — Norrie had telephoned them — who could care for him until we could get ourselves organized. Two years passed before I could see him again. I couldn't get passage on a ship. And submarines were a hazard.

Q: You came home from India, retrieved Chip and went to California.

HASELTON: I sponged on my Bay Area friends. Chip and I rented part of an old house, a duplex. Then we got a ship to our next post, Chile.

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Q: But tell me about your voyage down the coast.

HASELTON: Well, one day a German submarine surfaced beside our ship, causing considerable consternation on board. Fortunately, the Germans recognized that our ship was Argentinian. And since they were not at war with Argentina, the submarine resubmerged and vanished. People were somewhat casual about travel in those days.

After we left the ship and it sailed on to Argentina, a bomb, which all along had lain concealed aboard ship, exploded in port. We heard about the bomb later because people at our embassy had furniture on board. They must have suffered a loss, but everybody was relieved that the bomb hadn't gone off earlier.

Q: What do you recall about your tour in Chile?

HASELTON: It's a very long, thin country. Our ambassador there was a political appointee. He was having no problem doing what he wanted to do, but he had a very nice wife who, the ambassador saw to it, attended everything whether he did or not; and if he didn't, he insisted she go by herself. Well, it wasn't long before all of us discovered she was very deaf. So I used to go and stand by her. As people spoke to her, she'd smile, I'd wait until a sentence ended, tell her what was said, and she would then answer.

This went on for a long time. She was an awfully nice woman. He was smart, but he was a pill. I felt so sorry for her, because he insisted that she go to everything although she could hear so little.

Q: Do you recall anything about your Wellington post?

HASELTON: It was one of New Zealand's big cities at that time. We thought it was great. There were two islands. You usually flew to the north island, Auckland, then transferred to another plane to go to the south island, as I recall. We quite enjoyed our service there. It's a lovely country, nice people, and the setup was good.

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Norrie came home one day saying, "I know the guy who's going to be our ambassador pretty soon." I said, "What do you mean 'pretty soon'?" He said, "Oh, a few years." "Who's that?" I asked. "Philip Habib," he said. And he was right, of course. Habib was very bright. How that head worked!

Q: You told me that he was unhappy with the Foreign Service at that time for one reason or another.

HASELTON: Because they'd been sending him here to do this and sending him there to do that.

Q: But your husband encouraged him?

HASELTON: Yes. Norrie took quite a fancy to Phil and said, "What's the matter with you anyway?" Phil replied, "I don't know why I should stay in this, all I do is donkey work." Which was quite true, he should never have been given that kind of work, because he was too bright. Norrie said, "Oh, come on, come off it." So, I think it was really Norrie — Phil liked him and I think it was Norrie who said, "Well, you've seen all you can here, I'm writing to get you into a more difficult post." Something like that, I forget the details. Phil left and had a good career thereafter.

After Phil left, I said to Norrie one day, when he was sort of in the dumps — he was missing this fellow who did such good work — "I hope you gave him a good write-up." And he said, "Huh! I reported that he was one of the most brilliant people I'd ever come across in the Service and I hoped they realized it and made the best of it."

Q: How do you account for the long and faithful service you gave to the State Department Bookair after your husband retired?

HASELTON: Well, to be quite honest, it was the only way Foreign Service women could make any money. (laughter) The Department wasn't as difficult as it has become and they

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would assign us so many days — usually it ran over about two weeks by the time you got in, set up the chairs, did your work during the day. And then you had to undo things and leave the place as it had been. On those conditions the Bookfair was allowed to go on. It was the only way that anybody ever acquiesced in a plan to earn money for “scholarship assistance,” as they call it. In other words, if a young person has brains, but is broke, and can't get a scholarship any other way, we can offer one more chance. Perhaps that person will be lucky.

Q: For many years, you collected books all year long and took them down to the Department. You worked in the bookstore, too, didn't you?

HASELTON: Yes. I'm a poor reader. I'm better at hauling them around than reading them.

Q: Your son and your husband were called in to serve, too —dragged down to the Department by the earlobes, according to your son—and you did it for many years. It was a very great service to the Department.

HASELTON: I have a feeling that the Department doesn't want these meandering civilians nosing around the Department, for security they say, but they simply don't want them around. That would be the end of the Bookfair forevermore.

Q: Well, we'll see. You certainly contributed more than your share of the work that was done. You're well known for it.

HASELTON: It was fun!

Q: I understand that before he retired, your husband had turned down offers of several embassies. Would you care to comment on why he preferred to remain with the Inspection Corps and to retire as Inspector General?

HASELTON: As so often happens, it was a time when politics entered the matter of placing political appointees in senior positions in the Department of State. To protest

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this, my husband resigned to call attention to efforts afoot then to replace trained career Foreign Service officers with unqualified persons. He sent his resignation not only to the Secretary of State but also to the President. I believe his resignation had the effect he hoped for in helping to keep the Foreign Service a professional career.

Q: Betty, one of the wives who served with you in Wellington has told me a charming little anecdote about you. I wonder if it's true? It seems you and Phil Habib were attending the same party where Phil was having a rather splendid time. Finally you said, "Phil, you had better go home now." And Phil (who was very fond of Betty) replied, "I wouldn't do this for anyone else, but for Betty I will." And he went home. Is there any truth to this?

HASELTON: (uncertainly) Well, there could be.

Q: Well, you yourself are the first to say that while in excellent health otherwise, at the age of 90, your memory has deserted you. We're happy to have these few moments from your long and interesting past. Thank you very much for this interview.

Interviewer's Footnote:

With some prompting, Betty Haselton has been able to elaborate on the events related. Her son has helped verify several experiences.

Because of an understandable tendency to wander from the subject given her loss of memory, the interview was conducted in short sections covering only a few experiences in a long career in the Foreign Service.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Spouse: Norris Swift Haselton
Spouse's Position: Foreign Service officer

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Spouse Entered Service: 1935Left Service: 1962You Entered Service: SameLeft Service: Same

Status: Widow

Posts: 1935-36Guadalajara, Mexico 1937-39Manchester, England 1940Calcutta, India 1942New Delhi, India 1943-46Santiago, Chile 1946-48Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1948National War College, Washington, DC 1952-54Wellington, New Zealand 1954-57Naval War College 1957-?Washington, DC (FS Inspection Corps)

Place/Date of birth: San Francisco, California, July 17, 1902

Maiden Name: Elizabeth GarrettParents:

Albert Garrett, U.S. Cavalry officer; also unidentified USG position

Mary Garrett

Schools: Convent of the Holy Names, Oakland, California area Corvallis College, Eugene University, Oregon University of California, Berkeley, BA in history, Class of 1925 Smith College (1 year)

Date/Place of Marriage: Los Alto, California - c. 1929

Children: Norris Swift Haselton

Positions held: Volunteer: * AAFSW Book Room, long and faithful service * Red Cross, Patient Information Desk, George Washing University Hospital, for 10+ years

End of interview